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ABSTRACT

Title VII of the Cooperative Research Act, now the Education Amendments of 1974, makes it possible for preschool age children to get started on basic reading skills early enough that they won't still be reading at the third-grade level when they enter high school. It also assures elementary students that their reading instruction won't be neglected as soon as they learn the alphabet. The Office of Education is working on the Right to Read program in all states, and the focus of these efforts is on the early years, in an attempt to prevent grave reading problems later, and on the elimination of illiteracy. The first move in this direction was the establishment of the Right to Read Office in 1969, which coordinated, observed, and evaluated more than 200 demonstration projects it had funded to test the theories and practices of reading instruction. Title VII has established a National Reading Improvement Program to continue, expand, and follow up work begun by the Right to Read Office. The major emphasis of the new legislation's comprehensive program is on innovative reading projects, state programs, and areas of special emphasis. Information from reading programs like the ones in Chicago and Miami can be disseminated to other agencies. (SW)

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GETTING DOWN TO BASICS IN READING *

by
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It is a pleasure to be with you at this recognition of International Literacy Day. We have common goals and it is good for us to share our plans with each other.

I will talk to you today about getting down to basics. If that phrase sounds familiar, it may be because you've heard it in so many soap commercials lately. I'm not selling soap, but it has been said that you can tell the ideals of a nation by its advertisements. I think we could do worse than to get down to the basics of what we're after in education.

If we were to build our reading education efforts on some abstract concept that literacy is somehow a desirable thing, we could flounder blindly around, handing out money and proclaiming ideals -- but achieving very little.

When we get down to basics, we realize that literacy is vital to the welfare of the people and government of every country. Reading is essential to communication. Communication is the first and most important element of understanding. Without understanding there can never be peace in the world. And world peace is the basic that all of us in the long run want to achieve.

Certainly literacy is important for its own sake as the means of equipping people with the skills they must have to function effectively and lead a full and free life in a fast paced, nuclear powered world. But

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* Prepared for Right To Read International Literacy Day Seminar, Washington, D.C., September 5, 1974.

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I am convinced that if we think far enough we will see that the world peace that universal literacy can bring is the real basic.

In the Office of Education, our first step toward solving the illiteracy problem was to recognize this basic significance. That step led to establishment of the Right To Read Office in 1969.

Right To Read's role has been to coordinate, observe, and evaluate the more than 200 demonstration projects it has funded to test both the many theories and the many practices of reading instruction.

All that Right To Read has done in the five years since the late Commissioner Jim Allen proposed has been done under authority OE had under already existing legislation--the Cooperative Research Act for the most part.

Now, under the newly enacted Education Amendments of 1974, the importance of basic reading skills has received its own statutory recognition. Title VII of this act outlines a National Reading Improvement Program to continue, expand, and follow up work begun by the Right To Read Office.

The purpose of the new program is to strengthen reading instruction for all age groups--preschool children, elementary school students with serious reading deficiencies, and youth and adults who are no longer in school but still need help.

Office of Education grants under this legislation will go to a relatively small number of school districts in each State for projects to train teachers and help children learn to read. That money will be

the capital we invest. The interest benefits from that outlay will be the successful projects that the States can then disseminate to other local agencies. These interest benefits will compensate for the initial investment many times over in the number of children finally reached by the project results.

The comprehensive program set up by the new legislation has three major thrusts -- innovative reading projects, State programs, and areas of special emphasis.

In the first area, Federal grants will be made to States or localities where many elementary school pupils have serious reading difficulties. Unlike an inexperienced farmer who may haphazardly scatter handfuls of seed over a patch of plowed ground, OE is going to plant these funds deliberately, in definite rows--because that's the only way to know where to look to see whether something is growing. If we're going to be accountable for our actions, if we want real, measurable results, and if we really want to help people--and we do want all these things--we must know where we're planting.

The innovative projects for reading improvement won't be vague, random efforts. They will begin with diagnostic testing to identify and deal with the problems realistically. The projects will involve the whole community in reading effort. Parents will be involved, and school boards and education centered organizations will be encouraged to support reading and literacy programs--as, indeed, they already do in many places.

Right now, for instance, Chicago has a Right To Read project that involves parents, professionals, and community representatives in a program

to develop reading readiness for children in preschool through second grade. Instruction and materials are designed to meet Chicago's unique needs. Parents know about and have a hand in what their children learn. The result in Chicago is not only fewer reading problems but greater achievement in all areas.

Miami has achieved comparable results with its Early Childhood Preventive Curriculum Development Center. The Miami project is an effort to identify potential reading failures before they become real failures. District-wide diagnostic tests were administered to find the children most likely to have reading difficulties. Those children were then given specialized extra instruction. Their teachers chose materials from a catalog compiled by other local teachers.

Attention to reinforcement and motivation paid off. Children in the program were able to read more effectively by the end of the first grade than other children at the same grade levels. OE's agreement with Miami provided that the Center must be open to any school, anywhere in the country, interested in observing the program in action and possibly adapting it to its own needs.

This is the sort of thing that will be supported by innovative project funds available under the new amendments.

Other projects will coordinate preschool and elementary school programs to make the process of learning to read a continuous one. This can free reading instruction from isolation, allowing it to become as thorough and prevading a part of each child's education as it certainly will become a part of each child's life.

The focus of these efforts on the early years and early grades is an attempt to prevent a compounded problem later on. That problem is familiar to you. The longer a poor reader, or a student who is actually functionally illiterate, is allowed to advance without competence in reading comparable to his grade level, the more difficult his problem becomes. His grades in other subjects will probably suffer. His teachers will find him harder and harder to reach as he becomes further removed from his peers, from his school, and from what should be his world. He may drop out of school and fall into the vicious cycle where reading problems trap him into a low-paying, unskilled job (assuming he gets any job at all). As a functionally illiterate adult, he is even further removed from any of our efforts to help him.

The second major thrust toward the elimination of illiteracy in the 1974 Education Amendments is to expand and strengthen State programs.

Many States, to be sure, are already running with the Right To Read ball. Thirty-one have declared themselves "Right To Read States" and have made reading improvement a top priority. State reading directors are seeing to it that local reading programs are coordinated and shared statewide. Vermont is working with its State PTA to encourage and train volunteers to work toward reading improvement. Alaska is trying telecommunication to reach isolated students. Tennessee has established an effective sequence of reading instruction through the grades.

The State education agencies bridge the gap between Federal comprehensiveness and local specificity. They are the liaison and overseer for the Federal Government, but they are the policy makers for their own State.

In broadening the States' role, the new legislation calls for an Advisory Council on Reading to be established in each State receiving Federal funds. The councils will be composed of school, college, and university representatives, and parents, education professionals, and reading experts.

Each council will advise its State education agency on reading programs of local districts and oversee and evaluate projects funded by Federal grants.

The State agency will coordinate reading improvement activities throughout the State and will give local education agencies the technical assistance they need. It will plan a State program broad enough and intensive enough and of quality high enough to assure a reasonable probability of success, and it will disseminate to other schools the methods used in successful projects.

The third part of the new program covers three special emphasis areas. The first of these is in determining the effectiveness of and the need for reading teachers and reading specialists. State education agencies will certify reading specialists. Local agencies will find out where and how their services may be used most effectively.

The second special emphasis area is inservice training to be made available on public television to teachers who wish to become certified reading specialists or merely to keep in touch with new ideas about the teaching of reading. State and local education agencies will be encouraged to allow academic credit to their teachers for TV courses in reading instruction just as they do for courses they attend at colleges and universities.

Television is already included in OE's effort to reach those 19 million Americans over 16 who read below the fourth-grade level and so are classified as functionally illiterate. OE recently awarded a contract through the Right To Read Office and the Division of Adult Education for production of an adult reading series for television. There will be 25 half-hour lessons in English and 25 in Spanish.

Both series will also be produced in cassette form for use in the reading academies authorized in the third and last special emphasis section of the 1974 Amendments. This final section calls for the establishment, through State or local education agencies, postsecondary institutions, or community organizations, of reading academies that can give reading help and instruction to out-of-school youths and adults. The adult academy program has been called a "Peace Corps for Literacy." Through the academies, volunteers will help tutor adults in churches, clubs, and libraries. OE will help the volunteers by providing service centers to give them technical assistance.

These, then, are the three major areas stressed in the National Reading Improvement Program: innovative projects, State programs, and areas of special emphasis. The program is authorized for four years. Money will be made available to every State. Educators, community leaders, and the private sector will be encouraged to participate in efforts to achieve the Right To Read goal of eliminating functional illiteracy in this country by 1980.

These are the facts. But there is a tendency in government, as there is in every business, to become so entangled in the everyday necessities

of a working bureaucracy that we may concentrate too much on facts and figures and not enough on people.

The people, in this case, are the preschool age children who may now get started on basic reading skills early enough that they won't still be reading at the third-grade level when they enter high school. The people are those elementary students whose reading instruction won't be neglected as soon as they learn the alphabet. And the people are all those whom one well trained reading specialist can help to learn the fundamental skills of communication.

On International Literacy Day we can reach out with the knowledge and experience we have gained in the United States and help other people by sharing that knowledge. We can look around and find out what is being done in reading instruction elsewhere in the world and learn from the efforts of others.

The Office of Education will continue to work toward the goal of the Right To Read program, because--when we get down to the basics--we know that a literate populace is fundamental to a peaceful world.

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